MARY MARGARET MULLINS GORDON

Oral History, ***EDITED VERSION***
Birth Date: August 1, 1905
Interview EI-996 by Dr. Janet Levine on April 24, 1998
Immigrated from Fermoy, Ireland at the age of 19.
Arrived June 15, 1925 [not 1927] on the *Adriatic*.


Mary Mullins, around 1925

As you read, write down answers to the questions. Then discuss the answers in your group.

Your group's dramatic skit will focus mostly on what Mary's family experienced back in Ireland and her experience at Ellis Island and her first day in America.

GORDON: My father was conscripted [drafted into the Army]. England was ruling Ireland at the time. They conscripted the men for the Boer War [in what is now South Africa from 1899-1902]. So after the [Boer] war was over, my father was sent back to Fermoy [in Ireland], where we come from, and he was stationed in one of the camps. He met my mother, Margaret O'Connor, there, and eventually, I guess, they courted and got married. My mother had six children, three boys and three girls. I was the oldest, then there was the three brothers, and my two younger sisters.

[Meanwhile] Aunt Margaret, who's his older sister, came to this country and she eventually sent for her mother and her sister and her brothers. His family over here [in America] didn't like him getting married and staying in Ireland. There [were] feelings that if my father hadn't got married he would have been in America. I never heard my father say that he would like to come to America. That was his home, his family, and that's where he wanted to stay.


Mary, next to her father, around 1910

LEVINE: How would you describe your father, just, as a girl growing up, uh, in Ireland?

GORDON: I loved both my parents very much, but my father was, my father was a military man, and he was strict, very strict. When the war broke out, in August 1914, my father was one of the first to leave the Birr barracks to go to France. I think I was nine years old. I remember my mother crying and all that sort of thing. I grew up with a lot of these men that were in my father's regiment, and we all knew one another, and most of them were killed.

My father was in France the entire war [until 1918]. [He] was missing for a while. My mother sure thought he was dead. She couldn't get any information. But it turned out that my father had been wounded, and he was sent to England after a spell in France, in the

hospital in France. My mother was sure he was dead, when she wasn't getting no information. So, anyhow, she gets a letter one day, she couldn't [bring herself to] open the letter because the letter wasn't in my father's handwriting. It was in a woman's handwriting.

She went across the street to her neighbor. She said, "Mrs. Roche, please open that. I just got this, and I don't know who it's from. I'm afraid to open it." And Mrs. Roche, opened it up, and she says, "It's from Bill, your husband. The nurse wrote the letter." My father had been wounded. That was the first news she got from him. Well, everything was happy and glorious in our house. He would be in a hospital there for a while, in Ireland. And my mother did go to see him. And finally he came back. The war was over.

Most of Mary's father's family immigrated to America. Why didn't he?

What two wars did Mary's father fight in for Great Britain?

[But meanwhile] We had the 1916 rebellion in Ireland, the Easter Rebellion. I was eleven years old then. There was trouble from then on. And things were different, and you done what the government [said], and the people had nothing to say about it.

I remember we had a ***fesh*** one Sunday. A fesh is an Irish concert, and it was held on the college grounds [at] St. Coleman's College, directly across the street from my uncle's house. And there was a big wall enclosing the college and the churches and the parade grounds and everything, and they had a lot of students from out of town and from the town that lived there. They had big banners across the street announcing that there was this big fesh. There were all kinds of bands and refreshments and, and dancing and things like that that went on. It was beautiful. It was in summer.

And when the [English] soldiers were let out for the afternoon—that was their time out around the town—all the soldiers came up and pulled the banners off of the streets. And [the soldiers] tried to get in through the big doors. And there was clashes and fighting and shop windows were all broken, merchandise was all out on the street.

Well, things didn't get any better. By that time, of course, my father was out of the service. And, uh, there was no work to be done. Things were in a very bad way, and the Sinn Fein business [pronounced "Shin Faine"—a pro-independence Irish group] was going on and there were killing. Then Black and Tans were sent from England over to Ireland, and that was terrible. ["Black and Tans" were former British soldiers hired to aid the Royal Irish Constabulary, or police. Their name came from wearing a mix of police and military uniform parts—some black, some tan.] They were the awfulest people. All they did was sashay around the town. They took that over, and they done what they wanted in the town.

And it got to the point Martial law was declared. You couldn't be outside your doors six o'clock in the evening. It was in the summer, too. [Mary is talking about a curfew.] And I remember that so well. You couldn't go to a movie in the evening. You had to have the names of the whole family who was living there, or anybody that was staying with you.

LEVINE: Were you ever caught?

GORDON: Oh, no. My father saw to it. It was always, "Get in the house, get the children in the house." It was terrible to be in the house in the summertime with the shades down and

everything. All this stuff was going on, you could hear the lorries [trucks] going up the roads to Cork behind our house, and they're screaming and yelling. Oh, Lord, and not only in the day, but at nighttime. My mother was a nervous wreck when any of us was out.

If the officers came into your house and went through your house and looked, the first thing they'd do was count who was in the house. And if somebody was missing, the officers would say: "Where is so and so, what are they doing out? Where are they right now?" And, you know, the officers were very cocky.

Why did "Black and Tans" come to Ireland? What does Mary think of them?

What is a curfew?

LEVINE: Did they come into your house?

GORDON: Oh, are you kidding? Yes, into the house. My mother used to stand up to them. And my father spent so many years in the English Army and fought for that country, [but] it didn't mean a thing [to these officers]. And my father had a regimental box which was his property. Uniforms and the medals that he got were kept in that box in his bedroom.

One officer, a young fellow, come in there and he, oh, he had to go through all our rooms. They were looking for rifles, because a lot of [the] killings [that] were going on were supposedly done with men with uniforms, and they thought that maybe some of the ex-soldiers were wearing their uniforms and joining the Sinn Fein. But my father wasn't involved in Sinn Fein. I remember my mother standing at the kitchen table, looking across at my father, and she said, "You go upstairs and see what's going on."

So my father went upstairs, and they went right through my father's box. They were on the verge of taking the whole thing, down the stairs, and my father said, "Stop right there." And I remember that I was so scared, and my father got into an argument with the officer there. He said, "That box is my property, I fought for that. I fought for your country," he said, "and that's my belonging. It's not leaving my bedroom." And they were insistent. My mother butts in. My mother said, "Get out of my house this very minute, or I'll throw something at you." With that, they went and opened the back door off the kitchen and looked all around the backyard. But you never knew what time there was a knock at your door.

I made my sacrament of Confirmation. The bishop come to our church, and we were, oh, we had a big, big Confirmation day, boys and girls. And in order that we could go and see a movie, the movie houses gave a matinee for the children so they'd be in [by] the evening and they wouldn't be out in the street when Martial law came at six o'clock. My father said, "Don't go over the bridge to the movie house over the bridge. Go to the movies on the river side, [on] our side." I'd only have a hill to run up [to get home]. So I promised, oh, you know how when you're young you promise all kinds of things.

Well, wouldn't you think I was so smart. All the girls and the rest of us were so smart alecks, we went to the further one [the movie house] over the other end, and we just dillied and dallied after the movies, you know, having a great time with our holiday, and we was halfway home and the lorries come, **BAAOOOHHH** [the sound of the horns on the lorries]. Oh, I'm telling you, I was more afraid of my father. I thought, "What were you thinking?" I was warned not to do this. [She hides between some houses with a friend, then manages to sneak home.]

When I got up to my father's house, right inside the door my father was standing. And he pulled me in the door, and he just looked at me. He had his glasses on the end of his nose. He just looked at me. Finally he said to me, "If you were caught out there and pulled into that lorry, I'd hate to think what would have happened to you." They were just scum, even the [regular British] soldiers didn't like them. And they were sent over there to try to quell the Sinn Fein, and they were the ones who were doing most of the shooting and most of the killing.

What did Mary's father think of the Black and Tans? Why?

What do you think Mary's father was afraid might have happened to her if she was caught outside after curfew by the Black and Tans?

LEVINE: Do you think it affected you personally in any ways?

GORDON: It affected my dad in a lot of ways, because he couldn't get, he couldn't get any work, hardly any work. But he had a pension from the service that helped out.

LEVINE: Why couldn't he get work at that time?

GORDON: There was no work. Work was very, very slow. It's sad, think about it. All these things, and for a small country, so much blood's been shed for it.

My father's family kept asking for me to come over to the States. I was the oldest and we were all grown up then. My mother didn't care for the idea of me leaving home, but especially my grandmother wanted to see one of the grandchildren, other than having pictures. Finally my father said, "Well, you're old enough."

At that particular time I was going steady with a boyfriend, a boy from our town, and I didn't want to leave him. I wanted to see America, [then] I didn't want to see America, and I used to hear my dad and mother always talking about it. In the meantime, there was girls that I went to school with [who were] leaving for America. Some of them had come over here before me. So finally it was settled that I was going to come to America.

I can still remember my mother. I remember she wore a tan, full coat, and she had a tan hat with a little orange rose on the front of it, a tiny rose on the front of it. And she [was] very, very upset. The band was playing, and I thought my mother was never going to let me go. Finally I found myself up on the ship and I heard my mother's last words, she said, "If you don't like America, let us know, and we'll bring you back right away." That was the last words I heard my mother [say]. My father, he cried, too.

Describe how Mary felt about going to America.

Do you think Mary's mother wanted her to go to America like her father did? Explain.

Then when we landed in New York, oh, everybody was on deck. So it was kind of nice by the time the ship got into New York. At first, I thought was so hot, I just thought I'd never stand it. Of course, the clothes that I had were suited for Ireland, because Ireland's climate is different. Oh Lord, everybody was complaining about the heat. The sun was so hot. I couldn't stand it.

What got me, I thought, [New York looked] like fairyland. You could see the cars on the thruways. My God, America's full of cars. Where are they all going? You know, everybody was, everything. And the Statue of Liberty. I heard about the Statue of Liberty when we were in school. To actually see it, I couldn't wait to write home.

When I saw Ellis Island, it's a great big place, I wondered what we were going to do in there. We all had to gather your bags, and the place was crowded with people and talking, and crying, people were crying. And we passed through some of the halls there, big open spaces there, and there was bars, and there was people behind these bars, and they were talking different languages, and I was scared to death. I thought I was in jail.

And you had to go to be examined by the doctor. We all stood in a big line, men and women. Gradually each one went into this little room. It was a little corner room, where the doctor was there, [with] one or two nurses. You had to strip down. You just done what you were told to do. If I was back home, I'd never leave.

Finally when you come out, somebody else goes past you. You grab your bag and you button yourself up the best way you can, and then you were taken to another room, and there were seats, like you were going to a movie, but, maybe about as big as this room. There was a counter, [with] two men behind it with uniforms. Their uniforms were open all the way down, no hats on, and they didn't have any air conditioning in those days either. And we were told to sit. We weren't told what was going to happen, just sit. Of course, there was a lot of people there beside me, and I'm sitting there.

How does Mary describe New York? Why do you think it looked that way to her?

How does she describe Ellis Island? How did she feel being there?

Finally my name was called, and I got up, and come over to the counter, and a door opened behind the counter at the corner, and these two ladies come from behind.

They had white voile dresses on them and big hats. My two aunts, Aunt Mame and Aunt Nell. I recognized them from their pictures. We had photos in our living room. I was so excited. I bust out crying. And my aunts, "Come, come, come, come, come, come down." "Do you know these ladies?" And I said, "Yes." "Who are they?" "That's my aunt, my Aunt Margaret and my Aunt Nell." "Well, what are their names?" I said, "Mrs. Cook and Mrs. Budd." I was shaking like a leaf. And they said, "Who's your grandmother? What was her maiden name?" They asked me a whole lot of questions before my aunts opened their mouths, they couldn't open their mouths.

Finally they said, "These two ladies come to claim you." And, "How much money have you got?" I think I had about five pounds, I don't know, but I had money, because my father said, "You take care of that money, you take care of yourself." [The guards] lifted up the thing, and my aunts came around to me, and they looked at me, and I just looked. I was so relieved [to see] these two people that I have never talked to. My younger aunt put her arms around me and hugged me and said, "Let's get out of here." We had to go back through this big opening, this great, big room, this light coming in through the windows up in the roof, and all these people talking different languages.

[But] then there was *another* desk where we had to stand, and I was asked more questions. I was asked how much money I had there, and who was these ladies, and these were different men.

And I started to bust out crying, and my aunt was embarrassed. She said, “You have to answer these questions. I can’t answer them for you.” So I had to answer the questions. I think I cried all the way. We got on the tender [a small boat] and got back to New York, and she said, “Now you’re in New York City.” And I couldn’t stop crying. No matter how many times they told me to stop crying, I couldn’t stop crying. All that relief came out of me. I was looking around to see anybody that was on the ship with me, and they had all departed.

What sort of questions did immigration officials ask her? Why didn’t Mary’s aunts speak up to help Mary answer her questions?

Why do you think she cried so much at this point in her journey, and not earlier?

So then we had to go to the restaurant, and we were walking down, down the street in New York City, on a hot, hot, June day, and we're looking at the windows, and inside the big windows of this restaurant they were making pancakes. I think it was Schraff's. In those days, they made pancakes inside the window. It was to draw people. And I loved pancakes, and my mother used to make pancakes all the time. And that wasn't the restaurant [where] they were going to take me. They were going to take me to a big restaurant. And they were pushing me away from there, “Come on.” I said, “Oh, I want pancakes.” And she said, “No, you don't want pancakes. We'll go to a nice restaurant, we're going to have dinner.” I said, “Oh, I want pancakes, please, I want pancakes.” Well, we wound up at Schraff's with pancakes anyhow. And I guess they were thinking, “We're going to have trouble with this dame.” (Dr. Levine laughs) But, uh, I was so overcome with everything, everything was too much at the one time, but I wanted my pancakes, and I got my pancakes.

So we finally come back, and we were to meet my cousin, my Aunt Mame’s daughter, Margaret, who I only had seen her pictures, [and her] brother, Charles. We were waiting to meet her in Grand Central. [Margaret arrives.] We all got on the train to come back home to Mount Vernon, Westchester County, going through the Bronx.

Well, anyhow, the train comes into Mount Vernon. They had a very large apartment on Prospect Avenue, which ran in front of the station house. So when we were walking down, everybody was shaking their hands and shaking their hands. It was a beautiful street. All the trees, and they were shining. When we [arrived], everybody was crowding out into the hall to grab ahold of me. I’m [thinking], who are all these people. I saw this little fat lady with her glasses on the end of her nose, tears running down her cheeks, you know, and behind her there was another lady . . . (she is moved) I was so frustrated I didn’t know who to look at first, and everybody was putting their arms around me and hugging me and kissing me and pulling me, and then talking to me, “How was the trip,” and everything. I couldn’t answer everybody at one time. I was exhausted.

LEVINE: What do you think it did as far as the influence on you?

GORDON: It took me a long time to get used to the different things people used to say. I went to dinner to some friends of my aunt’s in New York, and when one of the daughters got up from the table in the kitchen, I said, “She’s so homely, I like her, she’s so homely.” Homely meant ugly here, [but in Ireland] homely meant beautiful or friendly. So I had all these things to conquer.

I said one day to my grandmother, “I’m not going to open my mouth any more when we go visit.” She said, “Why, dear?” I said, “Because every time I say something, it’s the wrong thing.”

She said, “Well, that’s how we all learned when we come to this country. You’re going to have a lot of patience, and you’re going to have to listen and learn all these things. Don’t get upset. People understand that people are immigrating over here.” But I was always watching my mouth that I’d say the right thing.

[One day] I wanted to vacuum clean the living room. In Ireland you took your things out[side] and put them across the line and you beat them. Very few people at that time had vacuum cleaners. And my aunt had a vacuum cleaner. I was only here about three weeks. I wanted to do something around the house, you know. I took the vacuum cleaner out of the closet. I had never used it. I know she put it in the wall someplace.

So I put it in the wall, I couldn’t get it in there. I don’t know how, it didn’t fit, or I wasn’t doing the right thing. I don’t know. But I was going to do that vacuuming. So I went out and got a knife. Oh, this is the truth. Oh, the things I done! And I stuck it in, oh, the thing flew in my hand, and it bend the thing of the knife, and I flew halfways across the room. I said, “What the heck kind of a thing is this?” I had nothing to do with electricity in the old country. At that time there was no electricity in parts of Ireland. My part, too. You had lamps all around the place, oil lamps. Ever since, electricity, it took me a long time to put a plug in, even when I was married.

Mary Mullins Gordon with son William, 1931

LEVINE: How do you feel about your Irish side and your American side?

GORDON: I never forgot Ireland. I’m always interested in what went on over there. And for a long time my father used to send me the papers, the *Examiner*s, and I got all the news of what was going on there. Of course, things were easying out, things were getting a little better. And my family was all grown up, and I never stopped writing. But I was also an American citizen, and that meant a whole lot to me. All my children were American citizens, and they fought for America, and that made me very proud.

What did Mary have in the U.S. that helped her adjust to life in America?

Even though she spoke English, her language marks her as an immigrant. Why?

How does Mary balance her Irish side and her American side?

GRAPHIC ORGANIZER for Ellis Island Oral History

NAME of immigrant: **Mary Mullins Gordon** **FROM:** _____

YEAR she came to the US: _____ **AGE** upon arrival: _____

PUSH-PULL: What (& who) pushed her to go to America? What made her want to stay?

Reasons to go:

Reasons to stay:

It is decided:
SHE GOES TO AMERICA!

At Ellis Island:

After she arrives in the US:

AND: